

## VIEWPOINT

# Help Wanted: Chief Coherency Officer

by Daniel Seymour and Michael Bourgeois

*An institutional effectiveness office headed by a chief coherency officer may be just what's needed to support integrated, comprehensive strategies that foster student success and support institutional performance.*

Those who have an advanced degree in higher education are familiar with the concept of loosely coupled systems as described by Karl Weick (1976) in his classic article “Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems” in *Administrative Science Quarterly*.

Those who simply work in higher education are familiar with the idea in the form of divisions, departments, institutes, and centers. An institution of higher education is sliced and diced down to its schedule of classes—an impressive menu of thousands of individual courses. This vast array of silos, stovepipes, cubbyholes, and cul-de-sacs has the benefit of maximizing self-determination. Indeed, studies of faculty members over decades have consistently found that the most positive part of their work life is its “autonomy and independence.”

The downside to such loose coupling is that those structures have little capacity to develop and pursue a comprehensive, integrated strategy. The parts are not coordinated. Over time, they develop their own goals, culture, and distinctive practices. Turf is staked out. Border guards emerge. Self-interest becomes the intractable norm.

In stable times, systems that lack “coherence”—from the Latin root meaning “to stick together”—are able to thrive as their parts engage in individual pursuits. But when the environment becomes hyperactive, those same parts are often unwilling or unable to coordinate their activities. For colleges

and universities, that lack of coordination is interpreted by others as anachronistic or elitist or both.

The result is the perception that higher education needs to be “held accountable.”

We believe that the solution, emerging across the country, is an integrated institutional effectiveness (IE) office headed by what we have characterized as a “chief coherency officer.”

The newly formed Association for Higher Education Effectiveness (AHEE) defines institutional effectiveness as “the purposeful coordination and integration of functions that foster student success and support institutional performance, quality, and efficiency; those functions include strategic planning, outcomes assessment, institutional research, regional/specialized accreditation, and program/unit review” (Association for Higher Education Effectiveness, n.d., ¶ 4).

This organizational unit is specifically designed to create more interdependency, more coordination, and more information flow—that is, moderately coupled systems. Its responsibilities are uniquely cross-functional and focus on relationship-building activities. As such, there is a great need for the supervisor of this office to serve on senior staff, facilitate silo-busting dialogue, and support deliberations that focus on the whole rather than the parts.

A useful example of why this emerging structure is so necessary is the completion agenda. In 2011, *Time Is the Enemy* was released by Complete College America. This report and other data that emerged captured the attention of many (importantly, state legislators and board members) by revealing statistics about low graduation rates—only 60 percent of full-time students were able to obtain a four-year bachelor's degree within eight years; only 8 percent of part-time students were able to complete a two-year associate's degree within four years (Complete College America 2011). Minority students fared worse across the board.

Years later, however, after embarrassing headlines, a variety of task forces and mandates, and a slew of well-intentioned strategies, completion rate increases have largely stalled. Why? The primary reason is that most ensuing efforts have been isolated, localized initiatives. As one analysis reported by Mary Rittling (2016, ¶ 7) in *Inside Higher Ed* concluded, “Like the hodgepodge of pilot programs in previous rounds of community college improvement, these efforts won't produce systemic change unless they are designed in an integrated, holistic way and colleges make the commitment to implement them at scale.”

But there is hope to support integrated, holistic work in our institutions by pulling together responsibilities like institutional research, strategic planning, program review, and other functions that too often have been assigned almost randomly to various organizational archipelagos. Such IE offices are on a rapid rise. Units with leaders with titles like executive director of institutional effectiveness and assessment, vice president of institutional effectiveness, and vice chancellor of planning and institutional effectiveness are being created across the higher education landscape. Indeed, administrative positions with “effectiveness” in the title have nearly doubled from 375 in 2010 to 649 in 2018 (Seymour and Bourgeois 2018).

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Most of the challenges we have identified to this emerging structure are organizational in nature. For example, one immediate challenge involves loss aversion. While there are significant gains to be had in terms of increased integration and the ability to design comprehensive approaches, there is also the perceived loss of power and influence within the isolated pigeonholes. Another issue is the knee-jerk reaction to any addition to the administration. For some, the exercise is always going to be reduced to a zero-sum game in which adding resources to the administration is by definition taking resources from the classroom.

One other important challenge, however, is decidedly personal in nature: The position of “chief coherency officer” requires a skill set that is too often lacking in higher education. The skills that dominate in loosely coupled systems involve specialization. But the task of knitting things together requires strong interpersonal skills—the ability to build consensus, negotiate, and communicate in non-technical language. Group facilitation and project management skills are also needed. The list of necessary personal characteristics is long indeed: trust building, patience, listening, sensitivity, and empathy. And you can add a sense of humor and a thick skin to the list, too.

There is a skills gap in higher education: We need a few less people immersed in the bits and pieces and a few more interested in leading an effort to create coherency.

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